

Learning lessons

*An independent review of
Indigenous education in
the Northern Territory*



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System testing in an ESL context

Another frequent criticism of MAP tests are that they are not designed to sensitively measure speakers for whom English is a second language.

I don't like the MAP tests. When you are assessing a program like ESL, it is a huge mistake to focus on literacy alone. Why not test how well children speak? It would be more appropriate for us to use a more complex series of assessments. It is unfair on the children.

The review received arguments that MAP testing at Grade 3 for bilingual children yields a misleading representation of the child's abilities, particularly as at this stage the students would have had predominantly vernacular oracy and literacy development combined with limited oral English instruction. In other words, English literacy development has barely commenced. It is likewise argued that children in non-bilingual schools are equally unprepared for testing at this stage, as for them, English is a second or foreign¹⁴ language, an argument which is seen as applying to urban as well as remote area children. As such, students would not have developed sufficient English oracy—a prerequisite to literacy and numeracy—to allow academic parity with students for whom English is their first, and probably only, language.

The review was sympathetic to these arguments but remained concerned at the seeming inability to nominate the appropriate testing ages for standard tests. Is it that the tests are completely inappropriate, or is it that they are being applied at the wrong age? Would a validated ESL/EFL instrument allow testing at any age and still yield comparative data? ESL profiling goes some way toward but does not fully clarify the issues involved.

In the first instance, the NTDE needs to establish

- what are reasonable expectations for a student being tested in a language in which the student has limited proficiency
- when ESL students should be expected to be ready to undertake the same assessments as first language English speakers
- whether it is possible to establish common benchmarks for ESL and first-language English speakers and test for these.

¹⁴ The term 'English as a foreign language' is used to describe the situation where English was and continues not to be part of the surrounding environment, i.e. it is introduced. As will be discussed later in this report, in many communities, the school is one of the few sites where Australian Standard English is regularly spoken. However, it is difficult for many in Australia to conceptualise English as a foreign language when talking about long-term Australian residents as opposed to recent immigrants, and so the term may fail to signal what its users intend.